The Research Foundation for Strength-Based Approaches to Learning

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There is significant research available to support the use of a strength-based approach to learning for students who exhibit high-risk behaviors.

To begin, it is important to understand the differences between risk reduction and strength-based approaches to learning, and the potential impact they have on the overall success of students. The following chart indicates the clear distinctions between these two approaches.

A Risk-Reduction Approach	A Strength-Based Approach
• Focuses on the "at-risk" student • Focuses on programs to "fix the problem", or reduce its impact. • Focuses on practices that adults do to or for students • Focuses on professionals: teachers, counselors, and staff • Focuses on policies that are punitive and problem-focused	• Emphasizes that all students have strengths • Challenges *all* adults to build healthy, on-going relationships with students • Focuses on engaging students in planning for their own success • Creates opportunities for students to be involved and engaged in the life of the community • Is proactive, preventative, and solution-focused [1]
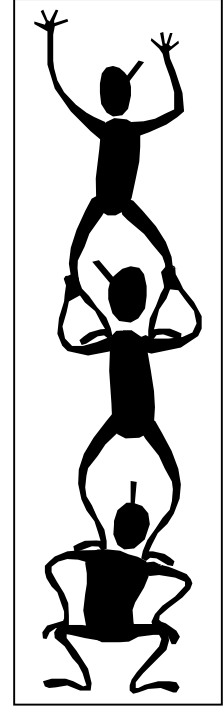
Secondly, it is important to understand the underlying factors that impact a young person's likelihood of engaging in risk behaviors. Researchers David Hawkins, PhD. and Richard Catalano, PhD., from the Social Development Research Group, have identified four distinct areas, or *domains*, of influence on youth behaviors: the individual or peer, family, school, and community. Through the *Communities That Care® Student Survey*, Hawkins and Catalano have also identified both risk factors and protective factors associated with each of the domains. The measurement of both risk *and* protective factors has been shown in longitudinal studies to predict the following:
- the likelihood of positive youth development,
- the probability of participation/victimization of risk behaviors. [2]

Individual and peer risk factors, such as participating in risk behaviors at an early age or having friends who engage in risk behaviors, increase the likelihood the young person will also engage in risk behaviors.

Family risk factors center around a family's history, attitudes about risk behaviors, discipline problems, and general family management styles.

In the *school domain*, a student's early disconnect from school and lack of academic achievement increases the likelihood that the student will seek satisfaction through risk behaviors rather than a commitment to learning.

Community risk factors include laws and norms that are favorable toward drug use, firearms, crime, and the general availability of drugs. The presence of these risk factors increases the probability that students will participate in risk behaviors. For a complete list of risk factors in each of the domains, please see the Tools at the end of this section.[3]

> "To me, the essence of the strengths perspective is that you actually believe that everybody— every community, every family, every individual— has a fund of knowledge, of capacities and skills, of personal traits and resources that exists within them..."
>
> --Dennis Saleebey [5]

In stark contrast to the hopelessness of an environment of risk and the resulting risky behavior, a ray of hope emerges from the strength-based perspective. It is important that we not view the risk and strength paradigms as opposites. Instead, we view risks for what they are—the adversities, challenges, and stressors that impact our lives, sometimes in negative ways. And we view strengths for what they are—the skills, relationships, attributes, and values that sustain and protect us in times of "risk." [4]

The strength-based research offers clear indicators of what is necessary to build the kinds of healthy attitudes, skills, and relationships that *all* young people need in order to succeed. These researchers tend to interpret success as the presence of "thriving" factors. They agree that competence, caring, character, confidence, and connectedness are all important to "doing well," or thriving; the presence of these thriving factors leads to the ability—and willingness—to contribute. [6]

Emmy D. Werner, PhD., in a 1998 article, "Resilience and the Life-Span Perspective: What We Have learned—So Far" writes,

> "Competence, confidence, and caring can flourish, even under adverse circumstances if youngsters encounter caring persons who provide them with the secure basis for the development of trust, autonomy, initiative, and above all, hope." [7]

A study of the various bodies of strength-based research provides a framework for healthy youth development. Although each researcher uses a little different terminology, they agree on the key elements that provide a consistent and clear pattern

for positive, healthy, youth development.   These frameworks, or models, share the belief that all students *require healthy relationships, life skills, and opportunities to contribute and participate in meaningful ways.*

Resiliency as a Protective Factor
Resiliency can be defined as "the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to severe stress or simply to the stress that is inherent in today's world."[8]

The research on resiliency began in 1955 with the work of Emmy Werner, Ph.D. She embarked on the longest longitudinal study to date in studying what makes a positive difference in the lives of people as they struggle with challenges, everyday stressors, and trauma.

Emmy Werner identified *bonding* as the most important protective factor that influences our children. Bonding develops healthy, supportive, caring, nurturing relationships and enhances a young person's ability to cope. Essentially, it enables them to "bounce back" from adversity.

Bonding, encased in a positive environment, supports and builds resiliency. According to Jeanne Gibbs, (TRIBES, 1995, p. 399), "Building positive environments within schools and families not only would be preventive, but could be significant in promoting academic learning and social development." [9]

Resiliency researchers, including Werner and Bernard, and Hawkins and Catalano in their work on risk and protective factors, agree there are six key building blocks in resiliency.   Each building block focuses on the importance of relationships, skills, and meaningful participation.

- Increase bonding by strengthening connections.
- Set clear and consistent boundaries from a caring perspective rather than punishment.
- Teach life skills through cooperative learning and experiential learning.
- Provide caring and support as a foundation for trusting relationships.
- Set and communicate high expectations.
- Provide opportunities for meaningful participation.[10]

Social Development Model
The Social Development Model, which is based on the research of David Hawkins, PhD and Richard Catalano, PhD, outlines strategies to address both problem and positive behaviors. The goal of the Social Development Model is healthy behaviors for all children and youth. In order for young people to develop healthy behaviors, adults must communicate healthy beliefs and set clear standards of behavior for young people, and young people must attach or bond with the adults who communicate those healthy

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beliefs and clear standards in order to be motivated to adopt those same beliefs and standards.

Three critical conditions are necessary for healthy bonding to occur:
1) Having opportunities for meaningful involvement with a positive social group or individual,
2) Learning and practicing the emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral skills to participate successfully in these opportunities, and
3) Receiving recognition for their involvement. [11]

Again, we find the emphasis on healthy relationships, life skills, and meaningful participation.

40 Developmental Assets™
The research conducted by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN, has identified 40 Developmental Assets necessary for healthy youth development. The data to support this research was collected through the *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* over the course of the last several decades. (The most recent data was collected from the 1999-2000 school year, with 212,277 students, grades 6-12 in public and private U.S. schools.)

These 40 Developmental Assets represent the positive experiences, skills, traits, and values that we, as adults, instinctively know young people need to build healthy, safe lives. The research indicates that the real power of the 40 Developmental Assets is the promotion of the healthy behaviors and attitudes necessary to succeed. For example, the research has shown that students who have a higher number of developmental assets experience greater academic success and involvement in school.   It also indicates that students with more assets in their lives are more likely to exhibit strong leadership skills, maintain their health, and value diversity among their peers.

The 40 Developmental Assets also have the power to protect young people from high-risk behaviors. The more assets youth report having, the less likely they are to make harmful or unhealthy choices, such as alcohol or illicit drug use, sexual activity at an early age, or being the victim of (or being victimized by) violence. [12]

Fortunately, building Developmental Assets is a shared responsibility. Literally, *everyone* within the community has the ability to make a positive impact on youth. This is especially true of teachers, due in part to the significant amount of time they spend with students on a daily basis.

Search Institute's 40 Developmental Asset framework organizes the 40 assets into eight key categories, four of which are external and four of which are internal. External assets are developed from the "outside-in." In other words, it is the families, other caring adults in the community, and institutions that provide young people with the positive relationships and experiences that foster positive growth. The four external categories are:

1. Support—from a network of caring adults such as family, caring neighbors, school, and community.
2. Empowerment—the belief and practice of valuing the contributions of young people.
3. Boundaries and Expectations—clearly set, communicated, and supervised rules and high expectations.
4. Constructive Use of Time—time spent in the arts, sports, youth-serving organizations, etc.

The Internal Assets also can be fostered and encouraged from the "outside-in", but ultimately, the youth themselves must make the commitment to live their lives according to these principles. The four key internal categories are as follows:
1. Commitment to Learning—the student sets a personal goal to achieve academic success and does so with a positive attitude.
2. Positive Values—living by the values that keep them safe, healthy, and responsible.
3. Social Competency—mastery of the critical life skills.
4. Positive View of the Future—a personal belief that they will thrive. [13]

More information about the 40 Developmental Assets is available on the Search Institute website at http://www.search-institute.org

Circle of Courage
The Native American culture has long understood the connections among individuals, family, and community. The tribal traditions that connect all the members to live collectively, harmoniously, and share responsibilities are woven with the common threads of strength-based perspectives. In the book *Reclaiming Youth At Risk: Our Hope for the Future,* Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve says, *"The circle is a sacred symbol of life…individual parts within the circle connect with every other; and what happens to one, or what one part does, affects all within the circle."*

Bonding, or belonging (commitment to others), is at the heart of tribal connectedness and one of the quadrants of the Circle of Courage. The remaining three connections are Mastery—seeking competence (skill-building), Independence—self-development, and Generosity—giving of oneself in building community. [14]

From Theory to Practice: Strength-Based Approaches to Learning

So what does the strength-based research and the thriving factors have to do with students' academic success? How can you insure success for all students and foster an enthusiasm for a lifetime of learning, especially with all the challenges students face today? And finally, how can this all be incorporated into the academic standards which are required as a measurement of the students' school success?

There is hope, there is promise, and there are solutions to working with our most challenging students.

The resiliency research found that "despite extreme adversity, many children identified as 'high risk' *do not* develop the litany of problems educators have come to expect." [15]

Recent studies from Search Institute suggest that high levels of assets have a direct impact on student academic achievement. The evidence reveals the following:
- The higher students' asset levels, the higher their current GPA.
- Students' asset levels are twice as likely as demographic factors to predict their achievement.
- Students with stable or increasing levels of developmental assets had significantly higher GPA's three years later than did students whose assets declined.
- Ethnically diverse students with high levels of assets are from five to 12 times as likely to be successful in school as those with few assets.
- Low-income students with high levels of developmental assets appear to be much more likely to do well in schools.[16]

Schools Build Assets was designed to foster the key elements that insure academic success for all students, including those most at risk.

The *Schools Build Assets* program:
- Builds healthy working relationships among peers, families, educators, and community members.
- Teaches critical life skills that have an impact on future learning and success.
- Provides opportunities for meaningful participation through community service-learning.

This *Schools Build Assets* program manual has been built around the following identified core characteristics. This program is based on the evidence provided in the research foundation, as well as the practical experience of the educators and prevention specialists from across the state who worked with the six pilot project locations.

Core Characteristics

Healthy Relationships
- ***Schools Build Assets* offers opportunities for students to connect with other positive adults within the community**. The interaction between students and community leaders, businesses, and other resources is important for creating a healthy relationship between students and adults. *Schools Build Assets* also provides opportunities for students to work effectively with other students, thereby building their peer-to-peer relationships.
- **Staff, students, and parents work to identify strengths as well as build assets.** Students' strengths are consistently recognized. Young people are

encouraged to use those strengths to improve their attitudes and behaviors, which, in turn, will increase the likelihood of academic success.

- **Parent involvement is encouraged and nurtured, but not required**. Parents may not be able to participate and that fact should be respected. Be flexible when creating opportunities for involvement, remembering to consider the family's individual circumstances.
- **Program delivery is culturally appreciative**. Services must be respectful of youth culture, individual family culture, as well as appropriate for the youth and family in regard to language, customs, traditions, etc. Differences in culture are appreciated, not merely tolerated.

Lifeskills

- **Youth are involved in the program at all levels, wherever possible**. Youth should be included in the process from the start. They may serve on the planning committee, be active in the program's development, and participate in the planning for community service-learning activities. The process of assessing needs, researching projects, building community support, and implementing the project should be youth-led. This is as true for at-risk (suspended and expelled, adjudicated, etc.) youth as it is for all other youth populations.
- **Broad-based skill-building opportunities, through community service-learning,** provide for experiential learning opportunities both in and out of school. These opportunities empower students to set their own goals, identify their own strengths, and master skills they view as important for their success.
- **Integration into existing curriculum.** It is important to note that while SBA was developed and piloted for suspended and expelled students, it has wide appeal to all populations of youth, and may be incorporated into existing curriculum at any grade level.

Opportunities to Participate in Meaningful Ways – (Community Service-Learning)

- **The community service-learning must be meaningful *to the youth*.** This is more easily achieved when the youth are actively involved in selecting, planning, and carrying out the service project.
- **There are greater opportunities for the development of community-school learning partnerships.** This is a win-win situation for the community as a whole, and especially for the students.
- **School credit is not required, but is strongly encouraged**. Student participation in the program will be greater if academic credit is offered for successful completion of the program. *It will be important to break the stereotype of service- learning as a means of punishment*. Offering school credit encourages

See the Community Partnerships section for more information on meaningful participation.

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academic performance, increases accountability, and documents the progress in reaching academic standards.

- **Outcomes are measured and reported** to youth, families, school personnel, and the community. The program is evaluated for its overall impact, as well as the influence it has on each individual student. This will provide accountability to funders, record student academic progress, provide documentation to improve the program as needed, and allow for recognition of students through celebration.

Other Points to Consider

- **Sustainability**. The program must develop a plan for continued funding. The school might use existing funding streams for the program, combine resources with another school in similar need for the program, apply for grants, or raise funds through student-led activities. Since the program can be implemented using existing staff and resources, it may be possible to keep program costs at a minimum. *There should be no cost to the youth or family.*

- **Confidentiality**. Both the youth and their family's confidentiality are respected, within the boundaries already in place in the school or community setting. While reporting youth progress is important, it is not important to share the youth's personal feelings or to discuss the youth's family matters without permission. It is critical that the youth and family trust the program.

See the section on Evaluation and Sustainability for further guidance.

A Comprehensive Plan

Keep the following steps of the comprehensive planning process in mind:

1) Assessment of the student, school, and community from a strength-based approach
2) Building community partnerships
3) Program strategies: structure, academic achievement, curriculum, and logistics
4) Student transition plans
5) Evaluation and sustainability

The following sections in the manual outline these components within a comprehensive plan of action. The key building blocks of each component, and any considerations, questions, or steps that need to be taken, are carefully outlined. Helpful tools and additional resources are also included following each section.

Tools
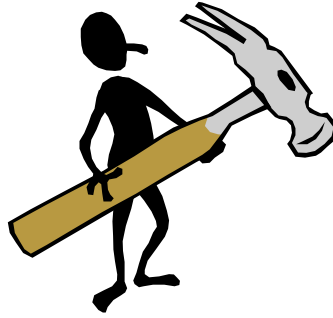
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